

## **What Lies Ahead?**

By Linda S. Thompson

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I am a Baby Boomer. I was a working caregiver. I am a business owner providing elder care education through workshops at the work place. I recently attended the Annual Governor's Conference on Aging. During those three days, attendees had the opportunity to listen to our state leaders, department heads and other professionals talk about, lecture, and impart information on aging. So what did I learn? I learned that if we're not nervous, we should be. If we truly believe our government backed support system, i.e., Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid, are prepared to handle the 76 million Baby Boomers approaching retirement age, think again.

Another thing I learned is that it is only in rare instances do government agencies talk with one another about programs they are considering, developing, or already have. When one state official asked a group of attendees how they envisioned health care and services in the year 2020, what I heard was same song, different verse. Build another building, put more money into existing social service programs, but not once did I hear a new, innovative idea. Not once did anyone address the issue of where's the money coming from. Only once did I hear someone speak of using existing buildings, i.e., our public schools that sit empty a good deal of the time, as resource centers for our aging population. Novel idea? Not really, just one that crosses the boundaries each department seems to have set for themselves. Heaven forbid they communicate with one another – they just might have to share the recognition for doing something right.

Maricopa County has been blessed with four Next Chapter programs. Why? Our diversity, our demographics, and because people just keep moving here. The Maricopa County Life Options groups hosted a break out session at this conference and while it was informative, it became apparent that all 7 groups knew each other, but each had their own agendas and no one was really working with anyone else. However, in all of the sessions I attended over these three days, Next Chapter was the only group that seemed to "get it."

What do I mean by that? In my experience of presenting workshops to Baby Boomers, there are several things that keep jumping out at me. First, Baby Boomers will never consider themselves old, we are perpetual teenagers. I believe it's because Mom and Dad are living longer and as long as they are alive, we Boomers will always be the "kids." Boomers will never accept the tags of "senior," "elder," or any other title that smacks of old. And last, but not least, Boomers are virtual sponges when it comes to information gathering. But no matter how much information you give them, less than 10% will do anything with it until they have a life crisis. That includes financial planning, long term care, health issues including affordability, and the proverbial juggling act of being working caregivers and maintaining a career.

For the last six years, I have been involved in providing information and referrals to working caregivers in the Phoenix area. Approximately 95% of those working caregivers are Baby Boomers. Some are included in the "sandwich generation," those who are caring for children and elder parents at the same time. Are they stressed out? You bet. Have they had time to think about what the future holds for them? Not much.

Now let's look at corporations and other employers. If they have an employee with a child care issue, they will bend over backward to help. But have that employee request assistance, time off, or flexible hours because of elder care issues and all of a sudden, management says, "take care of your personal problems on your own time." Well, guess what, sooner or later, those elder care problems will directly affect management staff, then what happens? When I talk with management about offering a series of informative workshops during lunch breaks at their work site, they will welcome me with open arms if it's free; attach a cost and they run for cover.

So, if government don't get it, corporate won't pay for it, and the Boomers gather information like squirrels gathering nuts for the winter but don't do anything with it, why don't I just go on vacation? Why do I keep butting my head against every brick wall in Phoenix? Because I do care.